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UNCLAS COLOMBO 000620

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DS FOR DS/IP/ITA, DEPT FOR SA AND SA/INS, NSC FOR MILLARD

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [CE](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PTER](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: LTTE FACTIONS SQUARE OFF IN EASTERN SRI LANKA

REF: A) COLOMBO 0607 B) COLOMBO/OPCENTER TELCON DATED
04/09/04

11. (SBU) Embassy Colombo received information today that rival factions of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), located in eastern Sri Lanka, became engaged in two gun battles beginning early this morning April 9. Three cadres, most likely from the northern faction, were reported killed when a group of about 16 crossed the Verugal River in the Batticaloa District at approximately 0315 hours local. The Verugal River has been the scene of a standoff between LTTE northern and eastern factions since eastern LTTE rebel leader Karuna split away from the northern LTTE (led by long-time leader V.Prabhakaran) in early March. According to RSO contacts in the Sri Lankan Police Special Task Force (STF), this first infiltration was a diversionary feint for a later seaborne assault by an estimated 200 northern LTTE cadres at the coastal town of Kathiraveli, located about 8 kms south of Verugal. In the second attack, STF reported that eight of Karuna's men were killed. STF reports a group of Karuna's men are currently encircled between Verugal and Kathiraveli, but Karuna was not there and is currently directing a counteroffensive to rescue his men. The conflict is ongoing and it is not known to what level it might escalate.

12. (SBU) Separately, the Directorate of Military Intelligence (DMI), has confirmed that forces loyal to Prabhakaran have commenced an amphibious assault on Karuna forces in the Verugal River area. The DMI reported that the forces were exchanging mortar and small arms fire, resulting in some 30-40 casualties on both sides. At this point, the Sri Lankan Army is observing the situation but remains unengaged in the skirmish.

13. (SBU) There is one American USAID contractor in Trincomalee, located just north of the contested area. The Embassy DATT was also in Trincomalee to attend a SL Naval Academy graduation, but he departed Trincomalee for Colombo this morning and is out of the contested area. RSO has been in communication with both officials and neither report signs of trouble in Trinco Town. The Consular Section is in touch with the (very few) Amcits in the east. The Embassy will be closed for holidays Friday, Monday, and Tuesday, but we will continue to monitor and report security developments in the east throughout the holiday period.

14. (SBU) Comment: There has been some speculation that Prabhakaran might make a move to eliminate rebel leader Karuna once Sri Lanka's parliamentary elections concluded on April 2. As flagged in Ref A, tensions have been quite high in the east for some time. There have been reports over the past several weeks of a build-up of pro-Prabhakaran and pro-Karuna forces in the area along the Verugal River, and the current fighting appears to be the product of that build-up. As noted above, how far this conflict might escalate is unknown.

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